Myth and Unity in Mansfield's 'At the Bay'

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> A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. ... To become is not to progress or regress along a series. ... Finally, becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming produces nothing by filiation; all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance.
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> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*[1]

> When we describe the moon as dead, we are describing the deadness in ourselves. When we find space so hideously void, we are describing our own unbearable emptiness. ... We shall not get back the Chaldean vision of the living heavens. But the heavens will come to life again for us, and the vision will express also the new men that we are.
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> D.H. Lawrence, 'Introduction to the *Dragon of the Apocalypse*'[2]

In approaching Katherine Mansfield's 'At the Bay,' published in her last collection *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922), the

reader is faced with the difficult task of unraveling a story that lacks continuity and narrative drive—in short, that seems to lack any kind of discernible or obvious unity. In a recent analysis, for example, Suzanne Ferguson examines 'At the Bay' in the context of 'Prelude,' an earlier Mansfield story, exploring the ambiguities of uniting these texts into a single 'whole'. On the one hand, she argues, the reader is pushed towards this combination by Mansfield's use of recurring characters, a feature she had employed to great effect with her depictions of the Fairfield/Burnell family during the previous decade of her writing. Ferguson thus places 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay' within the emerging modernist trend towards interlocking short story sequences, whose parallel is to be found in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). On the other hand, Ferguson acknowledges, there is an immanent tension in approaching either text in this way. 'They tempt the reader to form sequences,' she writes, 'only to leave great gaps and dislocations'.[3] 'At the Bay' simultaneously lures the reader into constructing a unity from its heterogeneous parts while resisting this process at every step. But at a deeper level, Mansfield uses this fictional device to undertake a profound reassessment of the notion of unity, one that comes to encapsulate the philosophical divide between the ancient and the modern world.

'At the Bay' is unusual in its construction, being composed of twelve interlocking parts that provide no discernible overall narrative. There is a strangely neoclassical pattern to Mansfield's story, with a strict emphasis on the unity of time, place, and character that suggests a veiled note of parody. The story even begins with a sentence—'Very early morning'—that resembles a stage direction.[4] Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr point out the story's resemblance to Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931):

> Two characteristically Modernist assumptions are conflated: man's life is no more than a single day, a

> flickering brief candle in the wider context of historical time; but, conversely, the whole of a man's life can be revealed during the course of a single day.[5]

The point of view, too, is a subversion of the omniscient narrator, weaving in and out of the characters' thoughts and actions while remaining detached from them. Antony Alpers writes:

> The 'silent character' she was called on to present, whether in 'At the Bay' or in its predecessor 'Prelude,' was not a human society but the lack of one. The silent character was the stillness of the bush, the disdain of the lofty islands for their huddled little pockets of colonial intruders, the silence of the vast sea-desert that encircled them.[6]

The narrator's voice is ghostly, disembodied, a still small voice that remains anonymous, inaccessible, but also oddly informal at various points.

The deliberate flatness of Mansfield's delivery, combined with her parodic use of neoclassical constructions, provides a subtle insight into the underlying violence of the order imposed by fiction. Ian Reid agrees: 'The problematic nature of categorical differences ... is pervasive throughout the story, and continues to be specifically linked with uncertainties of voice and focus'.[7] 'At the Bay' makes an understated but powerful modernist revision of the organizing principle that underlies narrative description. Mansfield makes a delicate and yet unmistakable allusion, for instance, to Stendhal's classic realist novel *The Red and the Black* (1830). In that book's most famous passage, Stendhal makes a spirited defense of his style against those who accuse him of being 'immoral': 'Ah, sir! a novel is a mirror travelling down the road. Sometimes it reflects the blue of the heavens to the eye, sometimes the mud of the filthy puddles on the road. And he who carries the mirror in his pack will be

blamed for being immoral! His mirror shows the filth, and you blame the mirror!'[8] Alluding to this statement, Mansfield transforms Stendhal's mirror into a puddle of water, denuding the 'real' of all pretense to a privileged human base in accordance with her 'silent,' disembodied narrator. Thus she writes: 'The far-away sky—a bright, pure blue—was reflected in the puddles, and the drops, swimming along the telegraph poles, flashed into points of light'.[9] The 'self' of Mansfield's narrator belongs not to a single identity but instead contains multitudes, articulating a voice that simultaneously foregrounds and parodies an anthropocentric understanding of the world.

The apparently disconnected opening section is thus one of the story's most important scenes, for it is here that Mansfield begins her task of charting the disintegration of her fictional world's surface unity into a series of fragments, disjunctions, and alliances. The first of these transitional images of 'becoming' is provided by the sun, which, as many critics have noted, acts as a temporal measure throughout the story: the narrative begins in the pre-dawn and ends with Beryl's adventure in the night. With each narrative particle, the sun symbolically shifts its position. In the opening section, Mansfield complements this temporal marker with a series of spatial transitions. The early morning mist that comes in off the sea obscures the view, blurring the boundaries between different parts of the land:

> The big bush-covered hills at the back were smothered. You could not see where they ended and the paddocks and bungalows began. ... [T]here was nothing to mark which was beach and where was the sea. ... It looked as though the sea had beaten up softly in the darkness, as though one immense wave had come rippling, rippling – how far? [10]

One thing blends into another, making it impossible to distinguish objects in their particularity. This lack of unity is as much a part of the living world as it is a feature of the landscape.

'Round the corner of Crescent Bay, between the piled-up masses of broken rock, a flock of sheep came pattering. They were huddled together, a small, tossing, woolly mass'.[11] Each part of the world in 'At the Bay' is thus a collective conglomeration rather than an individual unity. Beneath the *Gestalt* of perception, all things are multiplicities bound together by a random set of alliances.

Thrown together by contingency, life (and indeed, the story itself) unfolds as a succession of discontinuous connections, which Mansfield illustrates, for instance, through her ongoing description of the flock of sheep. 'The sheep ran forward in little pattering rushes; they began to bleat, and ghostly flocks and herds answered them from under the sea. "Baa! Baaa!" For a time they seemed to be always on the same piece of ground'.[12] Beyond this particular collection of sheep, furthermore, the flock harkens back, through this bleating call to their ghostly ancestors, to a broader, genetic pack that underlies their biological 'unity' as sheep. At the narrative level, the flock is subject to further important transformations:

> The sheep spread out into a fan. They were just clear of the summer colony before the first sleeper turned over and lifted a drowsy head; their cry sounded in the dreams of the little children... who lifted their arms to drag down, to cuddle the darling little woolly lambs of sleep.[13]

This complex passage echoes several possible literary alliances—William Blake's 'The Lamb' in *Songs of Innocence*, for instance, or the biblical symbolism of the lamb as a pure (and sacrificial) animal. Mansfield continues to pepper the story with this animal imagery, from the flock of sheep to Florrie the cat to the child-bestiary that assembles for a game of cards in section nine.

In 'At the Bay,' therefore, Mansfield explores several different but interrelated kinds of becoming. The first is a physical becoming, exemplified initially by the interlocking landscape and

the flock of sheep. Mansfield's frequent evocation of animals throughout the story works as a kind of 'reverse anthropomorphism'. In the opening section, for instance, the narrator reports the 'thoughts' and 'speech' of the bay's domesticated animals. "'Ugh! What a coarse, revolting creature!" said Florrie. But the old sheep-dog, not looking up, waggled past, flinging out his legs from side to side. Only one of his ears twitched to prove that he saw, and thought her a silly young female'.[14] Throughout this first section, therefore, Mansfield overturns the anthropocentric view of the world by foregrounding, from an inhumanly distant perspective, the landscape and the actions of the animals. It is the light of the sun that arrives to drive away the mist, Wag the sheep-dog who keeps the flock in order and moving ahead, and Florrie the cat who observes all these events. The sheep-dog, rather than the shepherd, is the chief actor in this opening section, and Mansfield describes how Wag not only 'looked proud' of his master, but also controls the movement of the group: 'Then pushing, nudging, hurrying, the sheep rounded the bed *and the shepherd followed after* out of sight'.[15] This perspectival inversion pushes humanity far into the background of Crescent Bay, allowing Mansfield to play with the anthropomorphic assumptions that underlie fictional technique.

Mansfield turns this critique into a satirical tool, using it to poke gentle fun at modern humanity's attempts to map the 'unity' of the world. As they are eating breakfast, for instance, the children rework the 'geography' of their food. Kezia 'dug a river down the middle of her porridge, filled it, and was eating the banks away,' and Lottie 'always makes a floating island' from her food.[16] It is the children, in particular, who are repeatedly integrated into Mansfield's animal motifs: 'The little girls ran into the paddock like chickens let out of a coop'.[17] Amongst the children, this symbolism culminates with the card game in the Burnells' washhouse:

> [Kezia] felt like she was a bee.
>
> 'A ninseck must be an animal,' she said stoutly. 'It makes a noise. It's not like a fish.'
>
> 'I'm a bull, I'm a bull!' cried Pip. And he gave such a tremendous bellow—how did he make that noise?—Lottie looked quite alarmed.
>
> 'I'll be a sheep,' said little Rags. 'A whole lot of sheep went past this morning.' ... 'Cock-a-doodle-do!' shrilled Isabel. With her red cheeks and bright eyes she looked like a rooster.[18]

In section seven, Mansfield juxtaposes the grandmother to little Kezia, creating a temporal contrast that symbolizes aging as yet another mode in humanity's becoming. Mansfield reinforces this imagery by having the grandmother engaged in stitching—an allusion to the Greco-Roman Moirai or Fates—while talking to Kezia about death and dying. 'What if I just won't?' asks Kezia, to which the old woman replies: 'We're not asked, Kezia. ... It happens to all of us sooner or later'.[19] These three moments exemplify Mansfield's transformative philosophy of becoming. There is no direct causal principle, no 'filiation' as Deleuze and Guattari call it, no sufficient reason that ties together these different becomings. The ordered chaos of becoming is spatial and temporal at the same time: inscribed in the existence of the grandmother is a chronicle of alliances and disjunctions, a testament to Kezia of the externality of her 'choices' (*qua* possibilities) in her path through life.

The carefree transformations of the children, who seem to embrace Mansfield's notion of collective becoming, are thus set in juxtaposition to the relatively static adult world. Nonetheless, Mansfield focuses on her characters' time at the bay because it has been set aside as a holiday, a change from the everyday, and it is in this context that the adults also come to question the hardening path that lies before them. Jonathan Trout, for

example, appears to embrace his new surroundings with a sense of abandonment and joy:

> At that moment an immense wave lifted Jonathan, rode past him, and broke along the beach with a joyful sound. What a beauty! And now there came another. That was the way to live—carelessly, recklessly, spending oneself. ... To take things easy, not to fight against the ebb and flow of life, but to give way to it—that was what was needed. It was this tension that was all wrong. To live—to live! And the perfect morning, so fresh and fair, basking in the light, as though laughing at its own beauty, seemed to whisper, 'Why not?'[20]

But this taste of freedom only highlights to Jonathan the drudgery of his everyday life, and he emerges from the water a moment later feeling nauseous and trapped.

Mansfield uses this scene as a contrast to section ten, in which Linda encounters Jonathan while out walking. The result is a conversation in which Linda meditates on Jonathan's shortcomings. In contrast to the well-off Burnells, Jonathan is a lowly clerk, and as a result there is a material gap between the two families. Linda's thoughts are framed by her own contemplation of life in section six. As she walks through the garden, Linda wonders at the apparently wasted life and energy expended by the flowering of the manuka:

> But as soon as they flowered, they fell and were scattered. You brushed them off your frock as you talked; the horrid little things got caught in one's hair. Why, then, flower at all? Who takes the trouble—or the joy—to make all these things that are wasted, wasted... [...] If only one had time to look at these flowers long enough, time to get over the sense of novelty and strangeness, time to know them! But as soon as one paused to part the petals, to discover the under-side of

> the leaf, along came Life and one was swept away. And, lying in her cane chair, Linda felt so light; she felt like a leaf. Along came Life like a wind and she was seized and shaken; she had to go.[21]

Removed from the everyday, Linda engages in a movement outside herself, a becoming-leaf, in which she realizes the transience of her own being. In the next paragraph, Mansfield foreshadows the exchange between Kezia and her grandmother with a visionary flashback to a parallel moment, in which Linda and her father dream of escaping from Tasmania into the vast unknown of China. Thus, as the sun sets, Jonathan Trout lays out his own fantasies of escape to Linda:

> I'm like an insect that's flown into a room of its own accord. I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceiling, do everything on God's earth, in fact, except fly out again. And all the while I'm thinking, like that moth, or that butterfly, or whatever it is, 'The shortness of life! The shortness of life!' I've only one night or one day, and there's this vast dangerous garden, waiting out there, undiscovered, unexplored.[22]

In contrast to the reader's first encounter with Jonathan, which takes place in the early morning, this conversation with Linda is in the evening. By now, Mansfield points out, the sun is sinking, and the story is drawing to a close with a rapidity that simulates the shortness of life. Linda's becoming-leaf and Jonathan's becoming-insect are intricately interwoven in this meditation on the brevity of their existence. Sylvia Berkman writes: 'The insect is created in multitudes; he is born, exists for his little time, or is destroyed by any one of a thousand accidents. He is at the mercy of a capricious force that has brought him into being and determines his extinction'.[23] Jonathan's comparison of himself to a desperately trapped insect is also, however, an ironic echo of

Kezia's choice of animal in the previous section. Kezia's 'ninseck' is affirmed because of the noise it makes: 'It's not like a fish'.[24] The complex symbolism of Jonathan's last name thus comes to epitomize his relentless drive towards an impossible freedom: trout, after all, swim upstream, struggling against the current in order to reproduce and thus continue the circle of life.

Mansfield invites the reader to a further contrast between Jonathan and Beryl, introducing her at the beginning of section three immediately after Jonathan's early morning swim, and gradually unveiling her character in the encounter with Mrs Harry Kember. As with the children, the source of Mrs Kember's fascination is her easy talent for transformation. Mansfield early on describes her as possessing a 'neighing laugh' and later, when she enters the water, 'she turned turtle, disappeared, and swam away quickly, quickly, like a rat'.[25] Mrs Kember urges Beryl to see herself as part of the collective that forms the natural world. 'Really, it's a sin for you to wear clothes, my dear,' she tells her suggestively.[26] Whereas Jonathan allows each wave to swell and then pass him by, Beryl learns the art of riding the waves, embracing the possibilities their force opens to her. 'Beryl stood, her arms outstretched, gazing out, and as each wave came she gave the slightest little jump, so that it seemed it was the wave which lifted her so gently'.[27] The comparison is cemented by a verbal echo of section two: 'Why not?' asks Mrs Kember, imitating the voice of nature that Jonathan heard previously that morning.[28]

Mansfield, however, reserves the sea as the most important metaphor in her exploration of unity and becoming. The sea, writes Saralyn R. Daly, 'pictures the alternate rise and fall of emotion, negation and affirmation and attitude throughout the story', but it also furnishes two crucial literary allusions.[29] The first is found in section eight, when Alice goes to visit Mrs Stubbs. In the photograph of the late Mr Stubbs, written with silver letters on a red background, are the words: 'Be not afraid, it is I.' [30] This line, as Angela Smith points out, is a direct quote

from Matthew 14:27, from the episode in which Christ walked to his disciples' boat on the lake of Galilee. Christ's power over the water is contrasted ironically to Mr Stubbs's death by 'dropsy', a potentially fatal condition in which fluid gathers either in the cavities of the body or in the tissues. The second allusion, which has not been discussed by any of the critical literature, is to be found in the Homeric references scattered throughout Mansfield's text. *The Odyssey*, for instance, is divided into twenty-four sections, one for each letter of the Greek alphabet; 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay,' with twelve sections each, reflect this structure. While there are many other subtle echoes, Mansfield draws in particular from two episodes in *The Odyssey*: Circe and Polyphemus. The animal motifs throughout the story, particularly the themes of bestial metamorphosis, point back to Circe's transformation of Odysseus's men into pigs. The encounter with Polyphemus, however, is the episode of greatest importance to Mansfield's story, for as Beryl slips away from Harry Kember he calls after her in frustration. 'Nobody answered him,' writes Mansfield, an unmistakable echo of Odysseus's witty reply to the Cyclops.[31] Looking back at the opening section with this knowledge, the significance of the sheep comes into sharper focus. More than Blake or the Bible, the image of the children fastening their arms around the 'darling little woolly lambs of sleep' replicates the manner in which Odysseus and his men escape from Polyphemus's cave.[32] Furthermore, Polyphemus was the son of Poseidon, god of the sea and the foremost enemy of the Greeks throughout the Trojan War.

Mansfield's allusions to these texts create a typically modernist juxtaposition between the ancient and the modern world. The sea fits this dual motif, for example, since at the same time as it symbolizes the primordial origin of life, its restless waves, momentary and without lasting impression, encapsulate the Baudelairean spirit of modernity. But unlike the neoclassicism of the eighteenth century, which remade the

ancients in its own image, Mansfield reveals the startling *otherness* of early culture. For while the modern reader assumes a certain cultural 'unity' with Homer and the Bible, since they are enshrined as the roots of western culture, Mansfield uses 'At the Bay' to measure our distance from them. Central to this point of view is early humanity's understanding of itself as part of, rather than separate from, nature. From the mythopoeic viewpoint, at the same time that humanity is 'naturalized,' the world of nature is reciprocally 'humanized' by assuming a subjectivity. In their classic work *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (1946), Henri and H.A. Frankfort write:

> Primitive thought ... cannot recognize our view of an impersonal, mechanical, and law-like functioning of causality. ... It looks, not for the 'how,' but for the 'who,' when it looks for a cause. Since the phenomenal world is a 'Thou' confronting early man, he does not expect to find an impersonal law regulating a process. He looks for a purposeful will committing an act.[33]

For the ancients, this connection is demonstrated by the ability of the gods to control the elements, whether it is Poseidon over the sea or Christ over the Lake of Galilee. In a world that, through the mechanisms of scientific method, imposes a rigid divide between subjective and objective, Mansfield's calculated return to the concept of mythological (as opposed to rational) unity appears strange, experimental, and ultimately uncanny.

This revitalized fascination with the radical alterity of the ancient world is a recurring characteristic of the modernist period, visible not only in Mansfield's stories but in such texts as Virginia Woolf's 'A Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus' and D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* (1926). What divides these modernist writers from the neoclassicists and, more importantly, from the romantics in the vein of Rousseau and Wordsworth, is that they are not attempting simply to recreate or recapture this vanished world. The failure of the romantics, in particular, lay in

the fact that a 'return' to a prior state inevitably meant remaking it, consciously or unconsciously, in their own image, the very image they were attempting to escape. Thus modernists like Mansfield were drawn to ancient culture not simply by a feeling of genetic affinity, but rather by a recognition of the immanent difference or otherness of early humanity. For the modernists, ancient culture is simultaneously a connection and a disjunction, a point of unity and a moment of disconnection that serves to unravel the prejudices of the modern subject.

Within the scope of 'At the Bay,' therefore, Mansfield creates a complex distinction between the mythical unity of the ancient world and the imposed, rational unity of the modern. Her story captures both the richness and the authenticity of the mythological world—whereas the ancients truly believed in the gods, we must rationalize ours—a spirit of vitality that the modern world, for all its logical correctness, cannot match. Frankfort and Frankfort write:

> For the life of man and the function of the state are for mythopoeic thought imbedded in nature, and the natural processes are affected by the acts of man no less than man's life depends on his harmonious integration with nature. The experiencing of this unity with the utmost intensity was the greatest good ancient ... religion could bestow.[34]

Mansfield's story demonstrates that chaos and contingency connect the intertwining parts of the world. Her world resembles the pile of sand-shoes that lies in front of Mrs Stubbs's store, 'so extraordinarily mixed that to get at one pair you had to tear apart and forcibly separate at least fifty. Even then it was the rarest thing to find the left that belonged to the right. So many people had lost patience and gone off with one shoe that fitted and one that was too big....'[35] What Mansfield gives the reader in 'At the Bay' is not a romantic return to the mythical domain of the ancients, but an entirely modern attempt to create a new form of

immanence, an immanence that has been lost in the age of transcendent rationality.

Notes

1 Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus.* Trans Brian Massumi (Minneaplolis: Minnesota, 1987), pp. 237-238.

2 Lawerence, D. H. *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* ed. Mara Kalnins (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 53-54.

3 Suzanne Ferguson, 'Genre and the Work of Reading in Mansfield's 'Prelude' and 'At The Bay', *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Joseph Longo, and Mary Rohrberger (Westport and London: Praeger, 2003), pp. 25-38 (p. 26).

4 Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party and Other Stories* ed. Lorna Sage (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 5.

5 Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr, *Katherine Mansfield* (New York: St Martin's P, 1981), p. 99.

6 Antony Alpers, *Katherine Mansfield: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 322.

7 Ian Reid, 'Always a Sacrifice': Executing Unities in Two Stories by Katherine Mansfield', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 77-94 (p. 87).

8 Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Roger Gard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), p. 374.

9 Mansfield, *Garden*, p. 6.

10 *Garden*, p. 5.

11 *Garden.*

12 *Garden*, p. 6.

13 *Garden.*

14 *Garden*, pp. 6-7.

15 *Garden*, my emphasis.

[16] *Garden*, p. 10.
[17] *Garden,* p. 11.
[18] *Garden*, p. 27.
[19] *Garden*, p. 22.
[20] *Garden*, pp. 8-9.
[21] *Garden*, p. 18.
[22] *Garden*, p. 31.
[23] Sylvia Berkman, *Katherine Mansfield: A Critical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1951), p. 194.
[24] Mansfield, *Garden*, p. 27.
[25] *Garden*, p. 17.
[26] *Garden.*
[27] *Garden.*
[28] *Garden.*
[29] Saralyn R. Daly, *Katherine Mansfield* Rev. Ed. (New York: Twayne, 1994), p. 91.
[30] Mansfield, *Garden*, p. 26.
[31] *Garden*, p. 37.
[32] *Garden*, p. 6.
[33] Frankfort, Henri et al., *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (New York/Baltimore: Penguin, 1949), p. 24.
[34] Frankfort, p. 36.
[35] Mansfield, *Garden*, p. 24.

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